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The Intercontinental Reflections of an Eighteenth-Century Mexican Rebozo

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The eighteenth-century Mexican *rebozo* (scarf) is an excellent example of a garment type that crossed not only ocean currents, but also boundaries of race and class. Initially, the rebozo was associated with indigenous culture in Mexico. Evidence suggests that the rebozo existed during the pre-Columbian period,¹ but it has been most commonly remembered as an article of clothing used by the Spaniards to cover the exposed bodies of indigenous women in the church setting. Aspects of the scarf's decorative elements, such as fringe and dying methods, are thought to have been inspired by Asian styles that arrived in Mexico via the Spanish Galleons, ships that crossed the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans delivering goods between Spain and its colonies. By the eighteenth century, women from a wider range of ethnic backgrounds and from various classes, including ladies of high society, wore rebozos in certain settings. But whereas the indigenous rebozo was made of maguey or cotton, the *doña's* (lady's) rebozo was embroidered or interwoven with threads of gold and silver on silk. These fancy rebozos were often accessories that commemorated special occasions ranging from the arrival of the viceroy to a day spent enjoying the local scene in the countryside.

In this paper, I examine primarily one scarf, an eighteenth-century landscape rebozo in the collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Figure 1). In particular, I discuss the embroidery of numerous figural vignettes framed between dyed ikat segments. The vignettes depict Mexican pastoral scenes with people riding in boats, eating, and dancing together. These upper-class *días de campo* (country day trips), which were a popular trans-Atlantic practice, brought high-society women into the so-called, "natural" realm of the indigenous woman. In Mexico, when town ladies were in this setting, it became appropriate to adopt the costume of the local, indigenous people, this included the rebozo, which was a visual marker of indigenaity – and thus, when worn by an upper class woman, was an act of resistance to the Spanish sartorial laws that dictated garment materials, colors, and styles for each of the social *castas*, or castes.

Using distinct visual cues in the scarf's embroidered designs as well as primary memoir excerpts and casta paintings, I argue that the scenes on this scarf, and rebozos in use by the upper classes, complicated visual delineations between social classes in the eighteenth century. I also show examples of printed fabrics that portray the elite practice of spending a leisurely day in the countryside from locations much farther afield like France and India. Such samples convey that the Philadelphia Museum's rebozo, with its *día de campo* vignettes, is representative of a larger genre in fabric design that crossed a variety of boundaries.

¹ Patricia Anawalt, *Clothing Before Cortés: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 126-127.



Figure 1. Mexico, late 18th century, silk, embroidered with cotton, silk, and metallic thread, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mes. George W. Childs Drexel, 1939 1939-1-19.

Rebozos are long, flat garments traditionally hand woven with cotton, silk, wool, or rayon to a grossly approximate dimension of six feet by two feet. Examples generally feature some sort of design integral to the scarf's fabrication often using woven or dying techniques, such as the ikat method, and most have fringe at the ends, which is worked with the fingers into numerous patterns documented to sometimes identify the region of origin.² The scarf can be worn many ways, but is usually wrapped around the upper body or folded over the head.

The landscape rebozo is a specific subset of the type identifiable by the distinctive scenes embroidered into bands of otherwise undecorated material. The scenes often represent specific locations or events, to commemorate an occasion or a trip, like a *día de campo*. Some landscape rebozos were purchased as souvenirs, as in the case of our example from Philadelphia, which shows very little wear and was likely tucked away as a special memento.

In her memoir, *Life in Mexico*, Frances Calderon de la Barca, the wife of the Spanish ambassador to Mexico City during the early nineteenth century, describes a pastoral festival similar to that embroidered on the scarf:

We were invited, lately, to a "día de campo," a very common amusement here, in which, without any peculiar arrangement or etiquette, a number of people go out to some country place in the environs, and spend the day in dancing, breakfasting, walking about, etc. [...] The music consisted of a band of guitars, from which the performers, common men, and probably self-taught, contrived to draw wonderfully good music, and, in the intervals of dancing, played airs from the *Straniera* and *Puritani*.³

Calderon de la Barca defines the *día de campo* as a quick trip to the country for dancing, eating, listening to music, and promenading. We understand that this type of amusement attracted a wide variety of classes and types of people from the city.

² Gustavo G. Velázquez, *El rebozo en el estado de México* (México: Instituto Mexiquense de cultura, 2002), 3.

³ Frances Calderon de la Barca, *Life in Mexico*, "Letter the Eleventh: A Country Fête" (Boston and London: 1843), accessed online February 24, 2016, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/calderon/mexico/mexico.html#XI>.

Calderon de la Barca goes on to describe one popular destination for the día de campo – the Paseo de Ixtacalco, or the “Viga,” by highlighting the role local indigenous people played in creating its atmosphere as well as the Paseo’s significance as a destination for upper class Mexicans to see and be seen:

The Viga is one of the most beautiful promenades imaginable, though it might easily be rendered still more so; but even as it is, with its fine shady trees and canal, along which the lazy canoes are constantly gliding, it would be difficult, on a fine evening, just before sunset, especially on the evening of a fête-day, to find anywhere a prettier or more characteristic scene. Which rank of society shows the most taste in their mode of enjoyment, must be left to the scientific to determine; the Indians, with their flower-garlands and guitars, lying in their canoes, and dancing and singing after their own fashion as they glide along the water, inhaling the balmy breezes; or the ladies, who shut up in their close carriages, promenade along in full dress and silence for a given space of time, acknowledging by a gentle movement of their fan, the salutations of their fair friends from the recesses of their coaches, and seeming to dread lest the air of heaven should visit them too roughly; though the soft breeze, laden with balm, steals over the sleepy water, and the last rays of the sun are gilding the branches of the trees with a broken and flickering light. . .⁴

Here, Calderon de la Barca poetically details many of the sights, sounds, and smells of the Paseo. In particular, she calls attention to the mixture of castas, mentioning figures from both the high and low classes. However, she omits the complexities between the obvious examples on the spectrum, a facet for which the día de campo became well known, and which often involves variations on the use of the rebozo. Calderon de la Barca highlights floral decorations created for special occasions, which are related to pre-Columbian rites and rituals, and later indigenous aspects of Viceregal culture.⁵ Likewise, the importance of water, present here through the canal, cannot be understated. The pre-Columbian city of Tenochtitlan was essentially an island in a lake surrounded by other lakes. After the conquest, as the Viceregal period progressed and land increasingly filled the lakes, water in the form of canals, fountains, and viaducts symbolized the indigenous history of the city.

With so many associations between the día de campo and indigenous culture, it makes sense that an upper class lady might want a finely crafted rebozo, as a souvenir by which to remember the occasion of her outing. My primary example from Philadelphia features embroidered scenes that one might expect to find during a día de campo depicted on alternating panels. Five bands of red angular designs created using the ikat dying method, repeat between the embroidered panels. The ikat panels are bounded by very slender, but solid, stripes of dyed color. These repeated geometric forms provide a sense of continuity in the rebozo’s design.

The four intermediary segments of the shawl are embroidered with numerous scenes (Figure 1a): boats floating on the water carrying passengers and goods, and people dressed in an array of delicately rendered costumes that complicate the mix of races and classes. In these vignettes, the figures interact, they greet and dance with each other, tables set with food are interspersed among the motifs, and winding flowery arabesques create a visual rhythm between the vignettes.

⁴ Calderon de la Barca, “Letter the Twelfth: The Viga during the Carnival,” accessed online February 24, 2016, <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/calderon/mexico/mexico.html>.

⁵ James Cordova, “Aztec Vestal Virgins and the Brides of Christ: The Mixed Heritage of New Spain’s Monjas Coronadas,” *Colonial Latin American Review* Vol. 18, No. 2 (August 2009), 189-218.



Figure 1a. Mexico, late 18th century, silk, embroidered with cotton, silk, and metallic thread, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mes. George W. Childs Drexel, 1939 1939-1-19. Detail.

The Philadelphia rebozo features a good variety of stitches including herringbone and multiple rhythmic patterns. The rebozo is reversible, with only subtle differences in the brilliance of the embroidery thread evident from one side of the scarf to the other. Metallic thread is used in baskets, cups, leaves, and women's blouses. The metallic material combined with the sophisticated use of perspective, evident in quite a few vignettes: the view of the bottom of a pitcher while a man pours a drink; a man holding and dancing with what appears to be a rebozo; the emergence of a table as a zone of transition between vignettes. All of these aspects of the scarf's design indicate that the Philadelphia scarf is a fancy version of the type, embroidered by a woman with a sophisticated sense of perspective.

Let us now turn our attention to the manner in which the social races and classes of Mexican society are displayed in the embroidered scenes. The costumes convey the sartorial distinctions for which the colonial period in Mexico is known, but become complicated in the vignettes – a factor due to the nature of the *día de campo* experience, rather than to any lack in the skill of the embroiderer. Some figures are easily identified by their clothing and behavior, others are less obvious. In one scene, we find an indigenous woman clearly represented wearing a *huipil* (Figure 1b). The *huipil* is a long and loose tunic that falls over an underskirt. The dimensions and decorations of the patterned blue top and red skirt correspond to depictions of similar costumes in *casta* paintings. The headpiece, seen in numerous *casta* paintings, closely resembles the form of the embroidered figure's head covering.



Figure 1b. Mexico, late 18th century, silk, embroidered with cotton, silk, and metallic thread, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mes. George W. Childs Drexel, 1939 1939-1-19. Detail.

Our Philadelphia rebozo, too, shows numerous romantic pairings in its figural depictions of the *día de campo*. Often, the female companion is cloaked in – what else? A rebozo. One woman wears a rebozo draped across her body, and another folds the rebozo over the top of her head. The latter of the two is paired with a gentleman wearing a black and white robe stitched in the herringbone pattern. This figure has been identified as a member of the Jesuit order by his distinctive, pointed hat, called a *biretta* (Figures 1a and 1c). One scholar has suggested that his flamboyant depiction with a flowing scarf and large cloak is a tongue-in-cheek critique of the behavior of Jesuit priests in Mexico, and he is repeatedly paired with a woman in the embroidered scenes.⁷ Clearly, amorous play was a part of the *día de campo*, just as love was a primary element of the *fête galante à la Watteau*.

Like the *día de campo*, the rebozo is often emblematic of a woman's ability to play with fashion, rank, and role in society as the garment is one that permits women to adopt alternative identities with one swift veiling. And the rebozo, as I have shown, was a key element of the *día de campo*. The rebozo role in sartorial play is evidenced by the fact that rebozos figure prominently in a self-referential manner within the Philadelphia example's vignettes. The scarf appears in the embroidered scenes a total of twelve times, and in three of those the scarf is visible as an independent object, perhaps as a garment for sale. In one scene a woman holds a rebozo across her body, as if to let a couple view the handiwork evident in the scarf (Figure 1a). In another, a man and woman hold a scarf between them (Figure 1b). They appear to be seriously considering its purchase. Finally, the rebozo is used as a prop in a dance (Figure 1d).



Figure 1d. Mexico, late 18th century, silk, embroidered with cotton, silk, and metallic thread, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mes. George W. Childs Drexel, 1939 1939-1-19. Detail.

The Philadelphia rebozo is particular in its depiction of a specific type of outing, a *día de campo* in Mexico, but it also reflects an international trend in creating fabrics that convey the interest in day trips to the country and a penchant for dressing down among the upper classes in France, and further afield in India. I have already referenced some paintings that record costume and traveling habits in France similar to those discussed in Mexico. There is also a fabric style that developed in the eighteenth century, whose design relates directly to the vignettes depicted in our

⁷ Elena Phipps, "Shawl (Rebozo)," in *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade 1500-1800*, ed. Amelia Peck (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 169.

Philadelphia rebozo: *toile paysage* (cotton country stamped) prints (Figure 2). Toile is a technique developed originally in Ireland and later adapted in France, in which small genre and landscape scenes featuring picturesque country figures were stamped onto cotton fabric using an engraved wood-block printing, and eventually a copper engraving, method.⁸ This process brought a degree of mechanization to the fabric-printing process and the fabric style became, and remains today, quite popular. Obviously the composition, process, and uses of the rebozo in Mexico and toile in France are extremely different. Toile is mechanically regularized in its spacing between each scene and vignettes are repeated. It lacks the hand-worked charm of our Philadelphia rebozo, but continues the theme of dressing like a country figure, and like the rebozo, provides the fabric to do so, although toile was generally used for furnishings in eighteenth-century France.



Figure 2. Jean Baptiste-Huet, "Les Delices des Quatre Saisons," Toile de Jouy sample, 19th-century reprint of 1785 original. Image courtesy of Michele Palmer, www.fabricmuseum.org.

My final example is a petticoat decorated with hybrid motifs from eighteenth-century western European and Indian styles juxtaposed (Figure 3). The scenes depict a country outing of elite Dutch East India Company employees living in the East.⁹ The composition is primarily floral with two figural registers at the center and bottom of the sample. The central register features upper class subjects wearing European clothing made from Indian prints. In the lower register, soldiers ride horseback in procession, and a prominent figure by carriage, to fight at war, or perhaps to the countryside for some fine food and a day of relaxation with music. This chintz design, like the toile example from France, conveys similar social preoccupations to those expressed in the Philadelphia rebozo.

⁸ Josette Brédif, *Toiles de Jouy: Classic Printed Textiles from France, 1760-1843* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989); see also "Les Travaux de la Manufacture," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed September 3, 2016, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/222071>.

⁹ Melinda Watt, "Petticoat Panel," in *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800*, ed. Amelia Peck (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 240-241.



Figure 3. Petticoat Panel, Cotton, painted resist and mordant dyed, Indian Coromandel Coast for the Dutch market, third quarter of the 18th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image is in the public domain.

Thus, the embroidered Mexican landscape rebozo from the Philadelphia Museum of Art tells us much about the racial and social milieu in its region and period. As a garment, its embroidery conveys scenes that demonstrate the subversive practices of dressing up and dressing down; its structure provides the means to participate, if the owner so chooses. With its intricately embroidered scenes, the Philadelphia rebozo remains distinctive from the French and Indian samples examined herein, while still fitting within a greater context of fabrics that depict country outings. As such, the rebozo offers individualized details as well as inter-continental reflections of a larger trend – a scarf that is at once global and local.

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